America and I: Short Stories by American Jewish Women Writers  
edited and with an introduction by Joyce Antler  
Boston: Beacon Press, 1990  
351 pp., $19.95

As the first historically based anthology of writings by American Jewish women, America and I reflects both the strengths and weaknesses of the historical approach to literature. Its 23 stories are divided into four sections: “From the Ghetto and Beyond: 1900-1929,” “Troubles in the New World: 1930-1961,” “Wider Glimpses: 1960-1979,” and “The Past as Present: the 1980’s.”

The memories in this collection are rich, conflicting, complex and heart-rending: Cynthia Ozick’s “The Shawl” (a concise encyclopedia of Jewish suffering); Anzia Yezierska’s “America and I” (in which the eternal immigrant cries out, “I was in America, among the Americans, but not of them...”); Rebecca Goldstein’s chilling “The Legacy of Raizel Kaidish: A Story;” and Mary Antin’s fairy tale, “Malinke’s Atonement” (about a rebellious, starving girl’s attempt to pass off a non-kosher chicken as kosher).

Some stories in this book are pure wonder: Tess Slesinger’s tour de force, “Missis Flinders,” that documents a woman’s cab ride home from the hospital after a 1932 abortion, and Ivy Goodman’s elliptical “Remnants: A Family Pattern,” which takes a woman’s traditional task of sewing and translates it into a collage of inescapable Jewish history: “You can never run away. They’re behind me; they are with me. I am nearing them. They’re my family.”

Other welcome surprises are Edith Konecky’s funny-sour voice that perfectly suits the garment district in “The Place” and Leslea Newman’s “A Letter to Harvey Milk” [which appeared in LILITH, Fall 1989], a striking example of Jewish pain reaching out into the world and teaching tolerance of homosexuality.

But perhaps as befits an historically based collection, the tone is more often somber, even grim. Stories are included that have solely historical relevance: Fannie Hurst’s shrill soap-opera that is far too long, and the fragmentary stories, “Room in the World” and “Z’mira,” each of which documents Jewish life, but does not transform it into art. Also missing: a sense of the pure joy of being both female and Jewish. In terms of literary forms, there is a dearth of stories that take risks with language, that are unafraid to leave ragged edges and to stir up trouble on all levels at once — philosophical, religious, sexual and linguistic.

The characters in these stories are predominantly passive on the outside, simmering on the inside. The women’s focus is outward too — on husbands, families, neighborhoods. The stories of the 1980’s are oddly bloodless, giving no sign of the agonizing struggles and ecstatic journeys into the re-vision of sacred texts and ancient taboos that symbolize this decade for so many Jewish women. Where are the stories about the contradictions of being a Jew and a feminist? Of women’s different relationship with their God? Excellent stories along these themes do exist, and I wish they had been courageously included here.

America and I is a stable, important volume, its themes carved out clearly. As a professor of American Jewish literature, I welcome its emergence, sorely needed in the annals of American Jewish fiction.

— Ruth Knafo Setton

Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism From a Feminist Perspective  
by Judith Plaskow  
282 pp., $21.95 hardcover, $12.95 paperback

For the past twenty years, in living rooms, classrooms and meeting halls across the United States and Canada, Jewish women have been teaching one another that the tradition we hold so dear has included only half the story of our past, has given us incomplete direction for living in the present, and has embodied only fragments of a vision of the future. Such teaching has been based on a growing body of Jewish feminist writing.
Standing Again at Sinai reaffirms the centrality of theological inquiry to a revisioning of Judaism and offers both an analysis of and a proposal for a new, inclusive theology of Judaism, a theology that questions both the essence and the expression of Judaism.

Plaskow examines the three traditional categories of Torah, God and Israel, examining how each concept has been interpreted in a way that either ignores, invalidates or denies women's experience. (In fact, given Plaskow's thesis, I would have liked to see even more examples of women's Torah, the history and literature that must become a part of the developing canon.) Plaskow opens up rich new areas for inquiry. She reviews the discussions of God-language that were the first step toward theological consciousness-raising for many, and proposes that we reconsider the power of using gendered language for God. Plaskow asserts that by using only gender-neutral terms like "Sovereign" or "Ruler" — instead of the clearly masculine "King" — we continue to picture God as a King. We need to use a "plurality of God-language that were the first step toward theological consciousness-raising for many, and proposes that we reconsider the power of using gendered language for God. Plaskow asserts that by using only gender-neutral terms like "Sovereign" or "Ruler" — instead of the clearly masculine "King" — we continue to picture God as a King. We need to use a "plurality of images," including female ones. Two final chapters of the book posit a theology of repair (tikkun) that embraces and reflects the full range of Jewish experience, including sexual experience.

In the most innovative section of the book, Plaskow calls for a recognition of the erotic energy that fuels the best efforts of our lives, and for a celebration of the erotic as a path to both holiness and wholeness. She writes that, in Judaism, sexual energy has been traditionally feared and denied as a God-given gift. In her discussion of the term yetzer ha-ra (usually translated as the evil impulse and used in reference to the sexual urge), she exposes the narrowness of traditional Jewish conceptions of healthy sexual expression that are based solely on male sexual experience and an androcentric interpretation of women's sexuality.

Plaskow suggests that a new theology of sexuality makes possible new visions of God as lover and companion, while simultaneously exposing the inherent prejudicial limitations of traditional notions of licit and illicit sexual behaviors. A new theology of sexuality recognizes the sanctity of all intense, essential relationships, both within and beyond the boundaries of heterosexual marriage. Plaskow writes, "when we touch that place in our lives where sexuality and spirituality come together, we touch our wholeness and the fullness of our power, and at the same time our connection with a power larger than ourselves:"

— Sue Levi Elwell

Ernestine L. Rose, Women's Rights Pioneer, 2nd edition
by Yuri Suhl
340 pp., $15.95 hardcover, $11.50 paperback

Ernestine L. Rose seems an unlikely person to find in the company of Susan B. Anthony, Lucretia Mott, Frederick Douglass, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Born in a Polish shtetl in 1810 (and daughter of an Orthodox rabbi), Rose was at the head and heart of U.S. social reform from the moment of her arrival in America. The year was 1836; it was the very beginning of the Woman's Rights and Free Thought movements.

Rose rejected Orthodoxy at the age of sixteen, while still in Europe. She travelled through Germany and France in the revolutionary atmosphere of the 1830's, supporting herself with her inventions of chemically treated papers (used to dispel kitchen odors).

Rose moved on to London, where she met her mentor and lifelong friend, utopian socialist Robert Owen. In these years she found a supportive husband in William Rose, and the couple journeyed to America. Here, as Suhl vividly recounts, Rose plunged into a world of lectures, legislative agitation, and battles lost and won in abolitionist circles, peace societies, and, always, women's rights conventions.

Rose's career closely, communicating the elation of the women's few hard-won successes, and the bitterness of the post-Civil War years when abolitionists and women suffragists, long companions in struggle, became bitterly divided over who should get the right to vote first: Black men or white women. Yet despite his devoted coverage of Rose's activities, Suhl's biography of necessity omits much. Rose was an intensely private person, leaving few letters and no diaries. The "Queen of the Platform" never spoke from notes, and few of her speeches have been completely preserved. This absence of Rose's own words in key scenes of the book is often frustrating.

The late Suhl wrote Rose's biography in 1959. Since then, his work has been updated and reclaimed by feminist scholars. In a new introduction to the book, Francoise Basch discusses the previously neglected subject of Rose's ethnicity, and in a new preface, Rosalyn Fraad Baxandall brings to the fore Rose's socialist feminist politics. The book as a whole attests to the persistence and continual evolution of the women's movement in this country.

— RK

Daddy's Home! Reflections of a Family Man
by Steven Schnur
152 pp., $12.95

In Daddy's Home! Steven Schnur's subjects range from the intrigues of first love, age nine, to the trauma of washing machine repairs and house-buying, from Schnur's discovery of the joys of cooking to the problems of raising children under the threat of nuclear war. Some of his strongest material is not about his own parenting experience, but that of his maternal grandfather in Europe of the 1940's. It is here that we see most clearly Schnur's ultimate goal: the story of one father is not lost, but passed on to his family and to others.

Schnur's essays provide a refreshing perspective on the family. The vulnerability and caring he exhibits gives the lie yet again to stereotypes of fatherhood, and opens a place for discussion of men's roles in the family.

As a woman, however, I was disturbed by an unanswered question throughout the book: What is Steven's wife Nancie doing? Home full-time with three preschool children (including twin infants), what is she feeling? Oddly, Nancy is a hazy, absent figure in this book of cogent and moving portraits. Where is a picture of co-parenting or of the spousal relationship?

Schnur, in writing the book, says he decided "not to try to tell my life story, but rather to concentrate on those kernels of intense feeling that so animate my life — the moments of sudden incandescence that fatherhood makes almost commonplace."

As a collection of such moments, Daddy's Home! is a beautifully written and warm account of one man's experiences.

— RK
The Classic Tales, 4,000 Years of Jewish Lore
by Ellen Frankel
Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1989
659 pp., $60

In her selection and retelling of 300 "classic" tales, Ellen Frankel has achieved some desirable diversity. Like folktales in many non-Jewish traditions, these stories blend realism with the fantastic, conjuring magical remedies for ill fortune, poverty, marriage gone awry, and the pious gone astray. Sections include "In the Beginning!," "In the Lands of the Diaspora!," "The Hasidic Period!," and "Tales of Elijah the Prophet." Quite an undertaking!

Running one-third of a page to six pages in length, these tales reveal the tellers' preoccupations with destiny, wisdom, sin, atonement, the desirability of riches, and the inability of riches to substitute for enduring values. A number of stories dramatize the tribulations of being poor or childless, facing one's own or a beloved's death, or disobeying a sage.

Frankel says that she was impelled to give Jewish children a wider range of Jewish tradition through "voices that haven't been heard" — that is, female voices. She also has deliberately omitted misogynist tales.

In the tale "Lilith," where Lilith prowls through the night seeking to harm newborn babies, Frankel tinkers with the classic version by giving Lilith, "compassion for her sister creatures... the mothers of these innocent babies!" It would have been useful, however, to know precisely what changes Frankel has made. Some readers may prefer to learn how, originally, Jewish tradition construed women's roles, rather than to revel in a revisionist version, despite its attraction.

The images in these tales, though rare, are splendid. "...he saw something flowing red, fluttering like a great wing. It was the beast's heart, and when he drew closer, Israel saw that it was filled with immeasurable sadness and pain" [from "The Werewolf"]'). Or, "And sure enough, there in the red soup floated the shimmering moon, like a thick slice of onion" [from "Chelm Captures the Moon"]'). Humor is in short supply, yet welcome, as in "The Unpaid Pledge" and "The Gentile's Impatience," both of which teach correct behavior.

Too often the title gives away the story, depriving the reader of the pleasure of discovering what happens even before she has begun the tale. For example, the title "The Bride Who Saved Her Husband from the Angel of Death" gives us the denouement at the outset.

Six indexes (including "Holidays," "Symbols" and "Character Types") and a list of sources and glossary are excellent. The collection Frankel has amassed, evidently with much labor and care, is impressive. "The basic impulse of the Jewish tale," she writes, is "to make sense out of the things that happen to us, as individuals and as a people."

Who's to argue?
— Carole L. Glickfeld

Mothers
by Gloria Goldreich
Boston: Little, Brown
439 pp., $18.95

In this fictionalized version of the Mary Beth Whitehead story, Nina and David Roth visit the Museum of the Holocaust in Israel where David becomes obsessed, as never before, with the notion of Jewish loss. Nina is unable to bear children. Enter Stacey Cosgrove, a bright and selfless mother of three whose obstetrician happens to be David's brother. The money she could earn through surrogate-mothering could fulfill her family's dream to relocate to California. Introductions are made, plots and waist thicken. The good will between the Roths and the Cosgroves has included, amazingly, an above-board one night stand for David and Stacey (no cold, artificial insemination for these virtuous characters). Finally, though, a tragic edy calls for unexpected, Solomonic consolations.

A saccharine but sensitive story unfolds about what are, after all, important issues: the parenting drives of men and women, relationships, the dark realities of Jewish continuity. An easy read.
— Ruth Schnur


Prophet by Shulamith Hareven
AUTHOR OF THE MIRACLE HATER

"A rich slice of Judean life.... Written in the sparse elegance of a Chinese proverb, this reworking of biblical themes... deftly gives poetic voice to the ineffable in humankind's ceaseless search for religious meaning."
— BOOKLIST (starred review)

"A neo-biblical novella of remarkably skillful description and unique theological insight."
— KIRKUS REVIEWS

Cloth, $14.95

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